

Editorial: West's blame-passing game

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Officials have yet to answer a lot of questions about the fertilizer plant explosion in West, but one answer — “It wasn’t my job” — consistently emerges when local, state and federal officials are asked how their agencies might have intervened to prevent the disaster.

Officials from the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Department of Public Safety, Office of the State Chemist and federal regulatory agencies seem to sidestep the question of responsibility whenever it comes to them. They had crucial information about explosive chemical stockpiles at West Fertilizer Co. but failed to share it. They knew of nearby residents’ exposure to severe danger but failed to raise concerns.

At TCEQ, authorities knew back in 2006 that 2,400 tons of ammonium nitrate were being processed annually at West Fertilizer. Asked whether the explosive threat should have been a concern, TCEQ Chairman Bryan W. Shaw said that wasn’t his agency’s job.

The Office of the State Chemist monitors facilities like West Fertilizer with large stores of hazardous chemicals. But the fire and explosive potential of such sites? “That doesn’t fall within our purview,” said Tim Herrman, head of the chemist’s office.

In testimony Wednesday before a Texas House committee, additional officials boldly stepped forward to not accept responsibility. The Department of Public Safety does keep tabs on hazardous-chemical facilities, Director Steve McCraw testified. But responsibility for keeping the public informed about the dangers is a local duty. “It’s a local-up. It’s not a state-down,” he said.

The mayor of West told National Public Radio that his government didn’t have regulatory authority because West Fertilizer was “technically not in the city limits. It’s out in the country.”

The huge amounts of ammonium nitrate were no secret locally. Resident Gary Polasek, an oil and gas consultant, says he had done business with West Fertilizer for 30 years. Though he didn’t want to point fingers, had it been his operation, he said, safety would have been “held to a much stricter standard.”

According to a Reuters news agency report Friday, the plant reported at least 11 break-ins over the past 12 years. Thefts were common for another chemical, anhydrous ammonia, which can be used to produce methamphetamine. Yet security at the plant remained lax.

Many officials knew the risks and could have sounded alarms. They chose not to. This pattern should sound familiar. A similar stove-piping of responsibilities and failure to share information was a major lapse that caused the CIA and FBI to miss important clues before the 9/11 attacks.

No amount of blame-passing will alleviate West residents’ catastrophic losses. The goal now, however, should be an honest reassessment of

procedures so disasters like this don't happen again. It's times like these when Texans should look to Gov. Rick Perry for leadership.

Hands-off answers

"We don't, at TCEQ, evaluate the explosive threat associated with these types of facilities. We look at the environmental and health impacts."

Bryan W. Shaw, *TCEQ chairman*

"It's a local-up. It's not a state-down."

Steve McCraw, *director, Texas Department of Public Safety*

"That doesn't fall within our purview, and it's fair to say we are not fire-safety experts. Nor is that part of our inspection activity, nor is that in our law or rules."

Tim Herrman, *head of the Office of State Chemist*